

## ***Alpha-Numeric Brand Names: Is Less More Or Is More Better?***

Anneleen Van Kerckhove, Ghent University\*

Hendrik Slabbink, Ghent University

Mario Pandelaere, Ghent University

The existence of millions of registered and unregistered alpha-numeric trademarks (US Patent and Trademark Office, 2010) indicates that alpha-numeric brand naming has become commonplace (Pavia, 1994). In designing alpha-numeric brand names, specific numbers may be selected for quantities they refer to (e.g., BMW 5 series, IT247; Gunasti & Ross, in press) or for their homophonic capabilities (e.g. U2, 7Up; Pavia & Costa, 1993). As the success of alpha-numeric brand names may depend on the liking of the number involved, differences in number liking may also be rather important. People find some numbers more attractive than others (Brown, 1979; Heywood, 1972). Next to associations with specific meanings (e.g., ‘lucky number 7’) structural characteristics of numbers (e.g. repetition of digits: Pavia & Costa, 1993) also affect number liking.

The current paper investigates the relation between number liking and number’s magnitude. While recent studies suggest that large numbers are better liked than small numbers (Gunasti & Ross, in press), we show that the relation between number magnitude and number liking is U-shaped: Both small and large numbers are liked more than medium-sized numbers. Given that people automatically represent the magnitude of numbers as increasing from left to right or from bottom to top (Fias & Fisher, 2005), higher numbers are suggested to be regarded as better (Gunasti & Ross, in press). However, not only obtaining a high *rating* or *amount*, but also achieving a favorable *ranking* is a primary driver for many people. With respect to intelligence, physical attractiveness and approval from a supervisor, people value a higher relative position more than a higher absolute quantity (Solnick & Hemenway, 1998). In a similar vein, the rank-ordered position of people’s income, rather than their absolute and relative income, predicts their happiness (Boyce, Brown & Moore, 2010). Given that a favorable rank also has a positive connotation, we suggest that a preference for smaller numbers is also likely. In sum, both smaller and larger numbers have well-established positive associations and consumers may therefore like small and large numbers better than intermediate numbers; this implies a U-shaped relation between number magnitude and number size.

Study 1 demonstrates the existence of a U-shaped relation between number magnitude and number liking. Forty participants rated 50 randomly selected and presented numbers ranging between 10 and 99 on attractiveness (7-point scale). Results of different multilevel regression models revealed that a model including a quadratic polynomial fitted the data better than a model including a linear trend only ( $\chi^2_{\text{Change}} = 97.51$ ,  $df_{\text{Change}} = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ); adding a cubic trend did not improve model fit any further ( $\chi^2_{\text{Change}} = 1.82$ ,  $df_{\text{Change}} = 1$ ,  $p = .177$ ). The quadratic relation between number magnitude and number liking indicates that smaller and larger numbers are liked more than intermediate numbers.

Study 2 ( $n = 54$ ) tested whether number liking are due to well-established positive associations for small and large numbers. The connotation evoked by the context was manipulated by playing background music when the participants rated the attractiveness of numbers. The music was selected in such a manner that it either implicitly refers to a favorable relative position (e.g., ‘We are the champions’ by Queen) or to a large amount (e.g., ‘I want it all’ by Queen). Multilevel regression analysis revealed a significant interaction between number magnitude and the evoked context ( $F(1,650.21) = 26.731$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Larger numbers were favored when the background music evoked a context of a large amount ( $F(1,162.903) = 6.392$ ,  $p = .012$ ). In contrast, smaller numbers were favored when the background music evoked the context of relative position,  $F(1,89.712) = 5.305$ ,  $p = .024$ .

In Study 3 ( $n = 46$ ), the relevance of these findings for advertising campaigns is demonstrated. In particular, we tested the perceived fit between alphanumeric brand names featuring small versus larger numbers and advertising slogans. We found that the context evoked by the slogan is a significant predictor of the appropriateness of small versus large numbers ( $F(1,460) = 18.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ). More precisely, when a slogan evokes the context of relative position versus a large amount, smaller versus larger numbers are deemed more appropriate for the alpha-numeric brand name of the advertised product.

The current paper shows that number liking is systematically related to the magnitude expressed by the number. Our findings add to a body of knowledge regarding the determinants of number liking (e.g., King & Janiszewski, in press) and extend the findings of Gunasti and Ross (in press) who found that larger numbers are preferred to smaller ones. Not focusing on specific product domains and including smaller numbers than Gunasti and Ross, we found that the relation between number liking and number magnitude is U-shaped rather than linear, and that this relation is due to well-established associations of small numbers with a favorable ranking and of large numbers with a large amount. We also apply this finding in a context relevant for marketers. We show that when a brand slogan implicitly refers to a relative position (large amount) a small (large) number is more appropriate to include in an alpha-numeric brand name than a larger (smaller) number.

The reported studies indicate that, within the set of 2-digit numbers, medium-sized numbers are liked less than both small and large numbers. It is, however, unclear what ‘medium-sized’ would refer to for ranges of numbers

containing less or more than two digits. Further, given that number liking is influenced by the evoked context, it would be interesting for future research to investigate whether evoking a positive meaning to medium sized numbers could lead to an increased liking for medium-sized numbers. Finally, although this paper only focuses on structural elements, idiosyncratic elements such as culturally determined connotations are also important for number liking.